



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Disagreements, of belief and otherwise

Citation for published version:

Pritchard, D 2018, Disagreements, of belief and otherwise. in CR Johnson (ed.), *Voicing Dissent: The Ethics and Epistemology of Making Disagreement Public*. Routledge, pp. 22-39.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315181189-3>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.4324/9781315181189-3](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315181189-3)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Voicing Dissent

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in "Voicing Dissent: The Ethics and Epistemology of Making Disagreement Public" on 1.2.2018, available online:
<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9781315181189>

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



DISAGREEMENTS, OF BELIEF AND OTHERWISE

DUNCAN PRITCHARD

University of Edinburgh

ABSTRACT. Much of the work on the epistemology of disagreement tends, not unreasonably, to take such disagreements to be at the level of belief. I elaborate some of the reasons why we might have this particular focus, and part of that involves arguing that as epistemologists by ‘belief’ we have in mind a specific propositional attitude. As we will see, with belief so understood it is hard to see how an exchange could constitute a genuine disagreement without conflict of belief. Relatedly, I explore a certain core class of ‘disagreements’ that I contend are in fact nothing of the kind when properly understood, since there is no conflict of belief, and hence lack the epistemic import that we might have expected them to have. But while I agree that the main cases of epistemic relevance do involve disagreement about belief, I nonetheless argue that we miss out something important if we confine our attention to just these cases. In particular, I argue that belief isn’t necessary for disagreement, and offer an alternative proposal about the nature of disagreements. While some cases of genuine disagreement without conflict of belief are not epistemically interesting, I argue that there is at least one exception in this regard. To this end I will be exploring disagreements at the level of our *hinge commitments*, which I maintain are not beliefs. As we will see, understanding the structure of these kinds of disagreements helps us to understand that certain strategies for resolving them would be hopeless.

0. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Much of the work on the epistemology of disagreement tends, not unreasonably, to take such disagreements to be at the level of belief. You believe that p , and I believe that not- p , and hence we have a disagreement over the truth of p .¹ I say that this focus on disagreements at the level of belief is not unreasonable since the kinds of toy examples, usually concerned with disagreements between (at least putative) epistemic peers, that are employed in this literature (folks arguing about the split of the restaurant bill and so forth), certainly are conflicts of belief. Moreover, as I explain

below, there are other good reasons to think that disagreement, certainly of a kind that has any epistemic import anyway, will tend to be disagreement at the level of belief.

One thing that we will be doing is exploring what it means for something to be a genuine disagreement. Part of this process will involve saying more about the notion of belief in play, since I contend that as epistemologists we have a quite specific propositional attitude in mind. As we will see, understanding this fact helps us to appreciate why we would focus on disagreements at the level of belief in the first place, since it is hard to make sense of the idea of a genuine disagreement that doesn't involve a conflict of belief in just this way. I go on to extract one practical consequence of this, which is that a certain kind of apparent disagreement of which we are all too familiar is not in fact a genuine disagreement at all. This is the phenomenon that I term *dialectical posturing*, and which I claim does not involve a conflict of belief. Accordingly, it does not have the epistemic implications that we might have expected it to have. We are within our epistemic rights to summarily dismiss the dialectical *poseur*.

Generally speaking I will be defending this contemporary epistemological focus on disagreements at the level of belief (albeit claiming as a result that there are fewer genuine disagreements that we might have hitherto thought). Nonetheless, while I agree that the main cases of epistemic relevance do involve disagreement about belief, I argue that we miss out something important if we confine our attention to just these cases. In particular, I will be claiming that belief isn't necessary for disagreement, in that there is a special (albeit unusual) class of genuine disagreement that doesn't involve a clash of belief. Accordingly, I will offer an alternative proposal about the nature of disagreements, which slightly tweaks the standard view. While some of the cases of genuine disagreement without conflict of belief are not epistemically interesting (since by their nature we tend to have an independent epistemic basis to doubt the epistemic credentials of what they claim), I contend that there is at least one exception in this regard. To this end I will be exploring disagreements involving a clash between what Wittgenstein (1969) termed *hinge commitments*, which I maintain are not beliefs in our sense. As we will see, understanding the structure of these kinds of disagreements helps us to realise that certain strategies for resolving them would be hopeless.

Before closing these introductory remarks, let me lay my cards on the table as regards the wider epistemology of disagreement debate. My favoured view as regards the epistemology of peer disagreement is one that allows a subject, at least once she has suitably reflected on the disagreement in hand, to continue to maintain her belief with the same level of conviction as before. This is a so-called *non-concessionary* stance, and although it has some adherents it tends to be unpopular in the literature, though for reasons that I think aren't very compelling (for example, that to be non-concessionary is to fail to display the virtue of intellectual humility).² This particular

issue about the epistemology of peer disagreement isn't quite our concern here, as much of what we will be discussing will be orthogonal to this topic. But, as we will see, this issue does get an indirect purchase, in that the cases that we will be looking at are such that, properly understood, there is less reason to downgrade our judgements in the light of disagreement than one might have previously thought. Our reconstruction of such cases thus lends itself to a more general non-concessionary stance to the epistemology of disagreement. Basically, we are epistemically more entitled to 'stick to our guns' that we might have hitherto thought.

1. DISAGREEMENT AND BELIEF

Belief gets used in lots of different ways, not just by philosophers but also by practitioners of other disciplines, such as cognitive scientists. There is at least an expansive understanding of the term such that it simply picks out very broad propositional attitude of endorsement aimed at a certain proposition.³ But this expansive rendition of belief strips it of philosophical interest precisely because it allows too much. Trusting that p , being pathologically convinced that p , accepting that p , and many other distinct propositional attitudes besides, will tend to fall into its remit. Our interest, particularly as epistemologists, is thus in a distinctive propositional attitude that belief that picks out, and hence is concerned with a more narrow rendition of the notion. So let us be *pluralists* about belief, and allow that there are different notions here that might legitimately be our concern when using this term, but nonetheless stipulate that we are here focussing on a particular rendering of the notion. Articulating a complete account of this narrow conception of belief would take us too far afield for our purposes here, but I think we can at least pick out three key distinctive features of this conception. (Note that henceforth when we talk about belief without qualification, it will be this narrow conception that we have in mind).

The first feature is core to this conception of belief, since arguably the other two features I will list simply flow from it. It is that belief excludes *agnosticism*, in the following sense: to believe that p is to believe that p is *true*, and hence is incompatible with being agnostic about the truth of p . Note that this doesn't apply to several propositional attitudes in the broad vicinity of belief. Consider, for example, the notion of *acceptance* as it is commonly found in the philosophy of science.⁴ A scientist might well accept the truth of a particular theoretical claim because she holds that this claim is the one that is best supported by the empirical evidence even while being agnostic about whether that claim is true. The evidence, after all, might only be marginally in favour of this claim in light of its competitors, and this might be a field where the evidence is constantly evolving. Accordingly, it might be rational for the scientist to be somewhat sceptical

about the truth of the target proposition, even while actively accepting it (and, for example, acting on this basis—e.g., by conducting certain experiments as a result, putting in a particular grant application, etc.). Acceptance is not the same as belief in our sense.

The second feature is that belief bears some basic conceptual connections to (epistemic) reasons, again in virtue of the fact that to believe that p is to believe that p is true. Of course, the conceptual connections are not so tight as to exclude the possibility of irrational beliefs, since manifestly such believing is common. But they do exclude the possibility of a propositional attitude to p counting as a belief if it is in principle unresponsive to rational considerations. If, for example, one would continue to endorse p even if one recognised that one has no reason at all for thinking p to be true, then it is hard to see why we would count such a propositional attitude as a believing that p , as opposed to a wishful thinking that p , or a hoping that p , etc. The point is that in such a case one is clearly manifesting a propositional attitude that has no essential concern for the truth, but since belief is by its nature directed at the truth, that excludes it from being a believing.

The third feature of belief that I want to focus upon follows naturally from the second. It is that it is not always a transparent matter what one believes. In particular, it does not follow from the fact that one sincerely thinks that one believes that p that one does believe that p . Instead, one can be mistaken about whether one's propositional attitude to p is really one of belief. The point is that belief is at root tied to action; ultimately one manifests one's belief via one's actions. But this has a consequence that we can discover that what we thought we believed was in fact not a belief at all. For example, imagine a parent who takes herself to believe that her child is innocent of the serious charges that have been brought against him. Now suppose that she discovers, as the evidence of his guilt becomes overwhelming (even by her own lights), that her conviction in his innocence is unaffected. Wouldn't this show that it was not really a believing at all, but rather some other kind of propositional attitude (e.g., blind faith in one's son's innocence)?

Putting these three features of belief together, I think we have a handle, albeit an incomplete one, on a distinctive propositional attitude. In particular, I think it is this propositional attitude that epistemologists are working with when they talk about belief. For example, it is this particular propositional attitude that is widely thought by epistemologists to be a constituent part of knowing that p . (For example, we would not want a propositional attitude as a constituent part of knowing that p that was compatible with agnosticism about the truth of p). Furthermore, notice that it is this propositional attitude that is plausibly in play in the standard examples used to motivate and illustrate the epistemology of (peer) disagreement literature. When two epistemic peers disagree over the split for the restaurant bill, for example, then they are clearly both believing contradictory propositions in just this sense (e.g., and not merely accepting different propositions). In particular, what makes this a genuine disagreement is that they each have an opposing

propositional attitude that involves a commitment to an opposing truth, and as such excludes agnosticism about that truth.

Notice that the foregoing explains why, for example, certain cases of apparent disagreement are not genuine because the propositional contents in play aren't in conflict. That one person claims that so-and-so is 'tall' in one context, while another person claims that the same person is not 'tall' in another doesn't suffice for them being in disagreement. Perhaps one of them is employing a more demanding notion of tallness than the other (e.g., she is a basketball coach). If that's right, then there need be no conflict in beliefs here—in that both might agree that this person isn't *tall-for-a-basketball-player*—and hence no genuine disagreement.⁵

That disagreement requires conflict of belief would also account for why some other cases involving an oppositional exchange that has the surface structure of a disagreement don't count as genuine disagreements. Suppose that I endorse p , and someone comes along and begins defending not- p . Imagine, however, that it becomes clear that my disputant is blatantly lying about not- p , or is clearly just playing around in their defence of not- p , or is being otherwise insincere in their defence of not- p . I think one would then naturally say that such exchanges are simply not disagreements at all, even though they might have the superficial appearance of one.

I think the same applies to some other kinds of exchanges where there is no deceit of insincerity involved, but also no conflict of belief. For example, cases when the other party is playing devil's advocate, or where one's opponent is adopting the stance of the Pyrrhonian sceptic (who, recall, is supposedly not committed to the truth of anything, or hardly anything anyway). In such cases one is rather playing the *game* of disagreeing, rehearsing through the moves of a disagreement, rather than actually disagreeing. And the natural explanation of why is that there is not a conflict of belief here.⁶ Although there is no deception or insincerity in such cases, given that such cases don't involve a belief in the opposing proposition, they don't seem best thought of being disagreements.

Note too that it is only usually genuine disagreement that imposes even a *prima facie* epistemic burden on one. That it is clear that your beliefs conflict with mine usually offers at least *some* reason to reflect on the epistemic standing of my own belief, unless I regard you as a completely uniformed or otherwise deceived about the subject matter in question. (We don't need to get into epistemic peerhood here, as the claim in play is so modest. Even if I don't think you are my epistemic peer, I think most epistemologists would accept that so long as I don't regard you as completely uniformed or otherwise deceived about the subject matter in question, then I have at least *some* reason to reflect on the epistemic standing of my beliefs as a result of this disagreement. Note too, in this regard, that such reflection needn't entail any revision of one's previous views,

though of course it might. Even the proponent of a non-concessionary view of peer disagreement, like myself, can consistently grant that such a disagreement demands further reflection). In contrast, if I think you are merely playing around or lying when offering your opposing arguments, then I don't seem to be under any epistemic burden at all to reflect on the epistemic standing of my beliefs (though of course I may do so). The devil's advocate case is slightly different on this score, in that it is an exchange that prompts me to reflect on the epistemic standing of my belief, but notice it does so in no way in virtue of there being a disagreement.

The foregoing makes clear that there is at least a good *prima facie* rationale for epistemologists to focus on disagreements of belief. First, because it seems that it is only when both parties genuinely do believe what they claim that we have a genuine disagreement at all. Second, because it seems that it is only genuine disagreements of belief that impose an interesting epistemic burden on you. As we'll see, this picture, while undoubtedly broadly on the right lines, isn't quite right, in that it leaves out some important cases (so we will need to move to a slightly different view). Before we get to that, however, I want to consider one implication of this account of disagreement, which is that a certain kind of apparent disagreement of which we are all familiar is not in fact a genuine disagreement at all, at least when properly understood. (As we will see, this will be a conclusion that will survive our move to the tweaked alternative view of the nature of disagreement).

2. DIALECTICAL POSTURING

The kind of case that I want to focus on concerns what I will call *dialectical posturing*. I contend that a lot of real-world disagreement about contentious matters, such as the existence of human-made climate change or the desirability of political correctness, is infected with a certain kind of inauthenticity. By this I mean that there are parties to the dispute who, far from expressing their genuine convictions about the subject matter in hand are instead merely playing a certain role, wearing a particular dialectical hat, if you will. They are *dialectical poseurs*.

Take the debate about human-made climate change as a case in point. Here we have an overwhelming scientific consensus on the one hand, and on the other hand various kinds of conspiracy theorist. Note that the opposition has to take the form of a conspiracy theory given that it is lined up against a scientific consensus, since how else is one to account for why the scientific community is so unified on this topic?⁷ But conspiracy theorists come in many different kinds, and we should be wary of lumping them together within a single catch-all category.

The debate about climate change is particularly useful when it comes to telling different kinds of conspiracy theorist apart. The reason for this is that science is generally regarded as an epistemically paradigmatic way of settling empirical truths (at any rate, we can reasonably take it as such for our purposes). Accordingly, rejecting a scientific consensus places epistemic burdens on one that simply do not arise to the same extent with regard to other conspiracy theories. Contending that JFK was assassinated by the FBI, for example, requires one to suppose that there is far less transparency in US government than one might wish, but such a contention hardly pits one against a putatively paradigmatic epistemic source. In contrast, arguing that the scientific consensus is wrong does bring with it just such a commitment. We can distinguish between two distinct kinds of conspiracy theorist in this regard in terms of how they respond to this commitment.

On the one hand, there will be those who take up the challenge of making rational sense of how such a paradigmatic epistemic source could have so systematically gone awry in this case. Given the nature of the challenge, this will require a quite considerable investment of one's epistemic resources. The opposing position needs to be researched and understood, and a nuanced line taken as a result. For example, the proponent of this view, aware that attributing deception on such a massive scale is not psychologically that plausible might instead opt for a view on which the raw data, accessible to a small subset of the scientific world, is engineered to give public data which subsequently misleads climate scientists at large. This account also has the added bonus of being able to allow most climate scientists to be acting in perfectly good faith in advocating human-made climate change. Moreover, the sophisticated proponent of the opposing position needs a compelling motivational story as to why anyone would be inclined to manipulate the public in the fashion (social and political influence, perhaps?). The details need not concern us. The point is just that there can be *sophisticated* conspiracy theorists, who manage—and remember that this by its nature requires a great deal of cognitive resources—to actively integrate the conspiracy theory into the noetic structure of their other commitments, even when such conspiracies are opposed to epistemically paradigmatic sources of knowledge.⁸

My concern here is not with the sophisticated conspiracy theorist, however, who raise epistemological problems of a very different nature to those that presently detain us. I'm rather more interested in what I take to be the more commonly found *unsophisticated* conspiracy theorist. This is someone who simply adopts the stance of the conspiracy, like a coat that one puts on to face a rainy day (but then takes off again when the weather brightens). The point is that no serious effort is made by this agent to reconcile the epistemic challenge posed to their other beliefs by their endorsement of the conspiracy theory (particularly in the case of a conspiracy theory

involving human-made climate change, which goes against the accepted science of the day). No meaningful attempt at noetic integration with regard to this conspiracy theory is attempted. It is, instead, more like a dialectical stance that they adopt in certain conditions, but which is largely disconnected from their other commitments. That this is so is easily revealed by how little thought has been given to why such a conspiracy would be undertaken, why it hasn't been exposed already, why science can be so generally effective if it allows high-level conspiracies of this kind, and so on.

I want to suggest that when people propose conspiracy theories in this fashion, they are not presenting their *beliefs* at all, and hence any dispute with them would not qualify as a genuine disagreement. In particular, the dialectical stance they take is not rooted in their wider actions, where this includes the intellectual actions of noetically integrating this stance, but rather stands apart from their other commitments. In this way it has a very different profile to a genuine belief, even though it may seem superficially similar. Note that I'm not here disputing that these subjects may well *think* that they believe the conspiracy theory that they put forward, but as we noted earlier, I don't think that this is enough to settle the question of whether belief is present anyway. Instead, I maintain that what is taking place here is a kind of dialectical role-play—not all that different in kind from the kind of dialectical role-play we looked at earlier (e.g., playing devil's advocate), albeit in a less explicit form—in that this kind of proponent of a conspiracy theory simply enjoys taking this sort of radical dialectical line (perhaps, for example, they imagine themselves as iconoclasts, or at least as non-conformists, unlike the wider, and more gullible, public around them).⁹

This is important, because it has epistemological ramifications. As we saw in the cases of merely apparent disagreement above—where there was insincerity involved, for example—we don't seem to be under any epistemic obligation to reconsider the epistemic credential of our beliefs as a result of an inauthentic exchange of opinions of this kind. Note that I am not saying here that the dialectical imposter is lying, since from their perspective, of course, they are expressing opposing beliefs (remember that our notion of belief allows that thinking you believe that p does not entail a belief that p). But there is a level of intellectual disengagement with regard to the opinion expressed—something which is a kind of insincerity, very broadly speaking—to the point that it is not an expression of opposing belief. As such, the mere fact that someone is proposing an opposing proposition in this case does not have any immediate epistemic ramifications. Epistemologically it is on a par with someone jokily 'asserting' not- p in response to your assertion of p as a joke.¹⁰

3. CONVICTION AND DISAGREEMENT

We have just seen that one consequence of our account of belief is that certain kinds of dispute are automatically disqualified as being *bona fide* disagreements, since they do not involve a conflict of beliefs. I noted earlier, however, that the idea of genuine disagreement being disagreement at the level of belief wasn't quite right, and I now want to make good on this claim. For it turns out that there is a class of cases where there are genuine disagreements without conflict of belief, and so we will need to slightly qualify our understanding of what constitutes a disagreement.

Importantly, however, this qualification does not undermine our point from the previous section that disputes with a dialectical poseur do not count as a genuine disagreement, since the cases where disagreement come apart from belief do not concern the kind of inauthenticity present in this case.

Think about our example from earlier involving the parent who is convinced in her son's guilt. Recall that we described the case such that the conviction in play is such that it is entirely unresponsive to reasons, such that it continues even in the face of, as the parent acknowledges, is overwhelming counterevidence. We noted there that this propositional attitude doesn't count as a believing, due its complete unresponsiveness to rational considerations. The parent after all, even by her own lights, has not only no rational basis for the truth of the target proposition, but overwhelming evidence against its truth. But her conviction in her son's innocence remains unabated. The point is that this is not a mere case of irrational belief, but is rather an instance where the link between belief and reasons is so cut off that it no longer counts as a belief at all.

Here is the question: given the genuine conviction in play, if one's gets into a dispute with the parent about the guilt of her son (during the trial, say), then would this be a genuine disagreement? I think we would naturally describe it as such. In particular, this case lacks the kind of play-acting and insincerity that one finds in the other examples where lack of belief leads to a lack of a genuine disagreement. In contrast, we here have complete sincerity. Indeed, in keeping with our notion of belief, what we have manifested here is a propositional attitude that excludes agnosticism about the truth of *p*, albeit in ways that have nothing to do with reason.

Moreover, although we might think of this conviction on their part as manifesting some sort of serious mental illness, I think we would more naturally consider it to be simply a manifestation of deep parental devotion. This is significant, since we might not class disputes with the seriously mental ill as genuine disagreements, no matter how convinced the patient might be. For example, imagine you are psychologist treating someone with Cotard's delusion, who is ardently maintaining that they are dead. In putting forward the opposing view, is one disagreeing with them?¹¹ Personally, my intuitions on this are unclear. I think the differences between this case

and our parent case are significant enough, however, that our hesitancy regarding the former needn't carry over to the latter.

What I am suggesting is thus a slight tweak to the account of disagreement in terms of belief that was offered earlier. Rather than belief being what is necessary for a *bona fide* disagreement, what's required is rather a genuine conviction on each side (i.e., a conviction that p that excludes agnosticism about the truth of p). This is something that is lacking in the cases we looked at earlier involving deceit, insincerity, posturing, and so on. But it can—unusually—be present in cases where one's sincere conviction that p manifests in such a way that it doesn't count as a believing that p .

Now one might object that this is a pointless qualification for the epistemologist to make (it wouldn't be the first!). After all, it looks to be in the very nature of cases of sincere conviction without the corresponding belief that we have an independent basis to ignore the opposing testimony. After all, the two propositional attitudes are precisely coming apart because of the failure of the subject's propositional attitude to be remotely responsive to counterevidence. Such cases are thus not epistemically interesting, since while they may be genuine disagreements, they do not generate any of the epistemic burdens of normal disagreements, and so can be safely set to one side. Indeed, notice, a disagreement of this sort would be of a very special kind. In particular, if one realised that this was the nature of propositional attitude that our parent had, then one would thereby realise that there simply is no epistemic purpose served in engaging in this dispute (though there might be other points to it, of course).

I agree that this kind of case of genuine disagreement without conflict of belief is not epistemologically interesting (*qua* disagreements anyway). But as I will explain in the next section, I think there are other plausible cases of differences of sincere conviction that don't (just) involve belief that are epistemologically interesting.

4. HINGE COMMITMENTS

In his final notebooks, published as *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein (1969) put forward a radical picture of the structure of rational evaluation. He argued that it is in the very nature of any rational system that it presupposes essentially arational commitments, what I am going to call *hinge commitments*. In particular, Wittgenstein claimed that these hinge commitments must be in place in order for one to be a genuine believer (or a doubter, etc.) in the first place. We are optimally certain of our hinge commitments, and that enables them to function as the fixed points relative to which we rationally evaluate other claims (identify what is a good reason for what, what is a good reason to doubt, and

so on). What is core to our hinge commitments is that they manifest our underlying conviction that we are not radically and fundamentally in error in our beliefs (what I have elsewhere called the *über hinge*).¹² Interestingly, Wittgenstein showed that this underlying core certainty manifests itself in our conviction (in normal circumstances) in apparently mundane claims, such as that one has hands, that the earth is round, that one's name is such-and-such, and so on. These look like normal empirical claims of a kind that we would have excellent rational support for. In contrast, Wittgenstein argues that their hinge status means that we could not make sense of the idea of there being reasons in favour or against such commitments.¹³

One consequence of this picture is that it entails that the very idea of a universal rational evaluations (i.e., evaluating the rational status of our commitments as a whole) is impossible, since such a rational evaluation would include our hinge commitments, and they are the arational fixed points that enable rational evaluations to occur. This point obviously counts against certain sceptical lines of thought, as they typically do proceed by attempting to doubt all of our commitments *en masse* (think about Descartes's famous metaphor of not inspecting the apples one-by-one, but tipping out the whole barrel). But it also counts against traditional *anti*-sceptical proposals too, as they attempt to rationally evaluate all of our commitments and show them to be rationally in order.

This is obviously not the place to explore and defend Wittgenstein's radical, and controversial, proposal in detail (something that I have done at length elsewhere).¹⁴ For the purposes of this piece I want to rather run with this idea and show how it could be usefully applied to certain kinds of fundamental disagreement.

There are few important things to notice about our hinge commitments. Although they are essentially arational and involve optimal levels of certainty, they can change over time, and indeed will usually do so in (indirectly) rational ways. One of the everyday certainties that Wittgenstein mentions—which like many of them he got from G. E. Moore—is that he had never been to the moon.¹⁵ This looks like an eminently plausible hinge commitment in Wittgenstein's day, but there may come a point in the future where it will lose its hinge status, at least for some. Moreover, notice why it would change. Remember that one's hinge commitments express one's underlying *über hinge* commitment that one is not radically and fundamentally mistaken in one's beliefs. It follows that as one's beliefs change—which can happen in entirely rational ways (attending to the relevant shifts in evidence, and so on)—so one's set of hinge commitments can alter accordingly.

Another point to notice about our hinge commitments is that by their nature they cannot by their nature be in conflict with our wider set of beliefs, since they are manifesting our underlying commitment that these beliefs as a whole are not radically in error. This is important

since not everything that we are optimally certain about is thereby a hinge commitment. In particular, the kind of pathological certainty that we noted above with regard to Cotard's delusion is not like that. The same goes for our loving parent who cannot accept her child's guilt, in that she perfectly well recognises that there is overwhelming evidence for this guilt, but simply refuses to countenance this possibility nonetheless.¹⁶

One thing that our hinge commitments share with these overwhelming convictions, however, is that they are not beliefs, at least in the specific sense of belief that we outlined above (and which is of particular interest to epistemology). While, like belief, they involve genuine conviction (one cannot be agnostic about the truth of a hinge commitment), they don't stand in the appropriate basic relations to reasons. In particular, it is in the nature of one's hinge commitments that they remain even once one recognises that one has no rational basis for their truth. This by itself sets them apart from beliefs in the sense that we are interested.

Can we be radically divergent in our hinge commitments? Wittgenstein seems to hold that while we can have different sets of hinge commitments, they are bound to be largely overlapping. The reasons are complex, but arguably there is something like a Davidsonian principle of charity in operation here.¹⁷ As Wittgenstein puts it at one point:

"In order to make a mistake, a man must already judge in conformity with mankind." (Wittgenstein 1969, §156)

In any case, there can certainly be *some* divergence in our hinges, and this is what I want to focus upon.

The most plausible candidate in this regard is, of course, religious conviction. Those who have such conviction have a hinge commitment that those who don't have such conviction lack.¹⁸ This is a matter of *faith*, after all, which in this context *contrasts* with belief. I think this is the best way of understanding religious disagreements, where by this I mean full-on debates between those with religious conviction and those who lack it. Think, for example, of some of the heated debates that took place in response to the so-called *New Atheism* movement, with atheists like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett lined up against defenders of the (in this case Christian) faith, such as William Lane Craig and Alvin Plantinga. At least on the religious side of the debate, this is not a debate about beliefs, but rather about their hinge commitments.¹⁹

Modulo our previous remarks about the nature of disagreement, this is a *bona fide* disagreement, even if it involves hinge commitments rather than (just) beliefs. There is genuine conviction here, on both sides (unlike, say, the case of the dialectical poseur). Moreover, unlike the parent cases of genuine disagreement not involving belief from the previous section, this is not a case where the propositional attitude in play ensures that we thereby have independent reason to

discount the countertestimony. If Wittgenstein is right, after all, we *all* have hinge commitments, and such commitments are essential if we are to be rational. It is just that the religious believer has a different set of such commitments to the atheist.

What is most interesting about disagreements of this kind that involve hinge commitments, however, is that they are not going to be resolved in the way normal disagreements, about belief are resolved. Throwing more and more arguments and evidence at the religious believer is not going to change her religious conviction. One's hinge commitments, recall, are immune to rational considerations, at least directly. Understanding this point highlights how pointless a lot of the New Atheism movement was, at least insofar as its goal was to change the minds of those with faith.²⁰

Does this mean that there is no way to rationally convince those with religious conviction to change their mind? Not at all. I noted earlier that our hinge commitments are not directly responsive to rational considerations, but that they can change over time in indirect response to rational considerations, as one's set of beliefs change. There is thus a sense in which one's hinge commitments are indirectly response to rational considerations. This points us towards the right way to conduct disagreements of this kind. Rather than a full-on charge that might well be appropriate in normal cases of disagreement (at least where there is something very important at stake), one should instead approach these debates in a 'side-on' manner. What I mean by this is that one should look for common ground, and use that common ground to change the person's beliefs in relevant way. If enough of those beliefs are changed, this could over time impact upon their hinge commitments.

Note that this means that there is still room for rational persuasion even in the case of the sort of fundamental disagreement involved in a clash of worldviews involving different sets of hinge commitments. In particular, it is not as if by appealing to hinge commitments one is thereby resigning oneself to epistemically incommensurate epistemic systems which will brook no rational debate.²¹

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

My aim in this paper has been to show that once we look at some real-world cases of disagreement we discover that there are some wrinkles to be added to the standard ways of thinking about the epistemology of disagreement. On the one hand, some apparent disagreements are not genuine at all, where this has important epistemic consequences for how we should respond to them. On the other hand, there are some disagreements that are *bona fide*, but which aren't best thought of in

terms of a disagreement at the level of belief. The epistemic upshot of this second kind of disagreement is that we need to approach it in a very particular kind of way, albeit one that—crucially—doesn’t necessitate abandoning rational processes of persuasion altogether.

I noted at the outset that my general approach to the epistemology of disagreement—which isn’t argued for here, it should be admitted—is quite non-concessionary. I think the cases we have looked at further reinforce, in a rather piecemeal and partial fashion at least, this general line of thinking. After all, if I am right, then there is a class of apparent disagreements that places no serious epistemic burden on one to downgrade one’s previous opinions. And there is also a second class of genuine disagreements where there are important limitations on the relevance of rational persuasion (even though, as we have seen, there is still a role for rational persuasion nonetheless). There are thus more potential reasons to stick to one’s guns in the face of an apparent disagreement than one might have hitherto supposed.²²

REFERENCES

- Berrios, G. E., & Luque, R. (1995). 'Cotard's Delusion or Syndrome?: A Conceptual History', *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 36, 218-23.
- Coliva, A. (2015). *Extended Rationality: A Hinge Epistemology*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Davidson, D. (1983). 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', *Kant oder Hegel?*, (ed.) D. Henrich, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Frances, B. (2014). *Disagreement*, London: Polity.
- Frankfurt, H. (2005). *On Bullshit*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.
- Gendler, T. S. (2008a). 'Alief and Belief', *Journal of Philosophy* 105, 634-63.
- (2008b). 'Alief in Action (and Reaction)', *Mind and Language* 23, 552-85.
- Goldman, A., & Blanchard, T. (2015). 'Social Epistemology', *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, (ed.) E. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology-social/>.
- Kallestrup, J., & Pritchard, D. H. (Forthcoming). 'Intellectual Pride and Intellectual Humility', *Pride*, (eds.) J. A. Carter & E. Gordon, Totowa, NJ, Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kienzler, W. (2006). 'Wittgenstein and John Henry Newman On Certainty', *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 71, 117-138.
- Kusch, M. (2016). 'De-idealizing Disagreement, Rethinking Relativism', *manuscript*.
- Minsky, M. (2007). *The Emotion Machine: Commonsense Thinking, Artificial Intelligence, and the Future of the Human Mind*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Moore, G. E. (1925). 'A Defence of Common Sense', *Contemporary British Philosophy* (2nd series), J. (ed.) H. Muirhead, London: Allen & Unwin.
- (1939). 'Proof of an External World', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 25, 273-300.
- Moyal-Sharrock, D. (2004). *Understanding Wittgenstein's On Certainty*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Newman, J. H. (1979 [1870]). *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Lewis, D. (2006). 'Elusive Knowledge', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74, 549-67.
- Priest, M. (2016). 'Intellectual Virtue: An Interpersonal Theory', *manuscript*.
- Pritchard, D. H. (2009). 'Defusing Epistemic Relativism', *Synthese* 166, 397-412.
- (2010a). 'Epistemic Relativism, Epistemic Incommensurability and Wittgensteinian Epistemology', *Blackwell Companion to Relativism*, (ed.) S. Hales, 266-85, Oxford: Blackwell.
- (2010b). 'Relevant Alternatives, Perceptual Knowledge, and Discrimination', *Noûs* 44, 245-68.
- (2011). 'Wittgensteinian Quasi-Fideism', *Oxford Studies in the Philosophy of Religion* 4, 145-59.
- (2012a). 'Disagreement, Scepticism, and Track-Record Arguments', *Disagreement and Scepticism*, (ed.) D. Machuca, London: Routledge.
- (2012b). 'Wittgenstein and the Groundlessness of Our Believing', *Synthese* 189, 255-72.
- (2013). 'Davidson on Radical Skepticism', *Blackwell Companion to Donald Davidson*, (eds.) E. LePore & K. Ludwig, 521-33, Oxford: Blackwell.
- (2015). 'Wittgenstein on Faith and Reason: The Influence of Newman', *God, Truth and Other Enigmas*, (ed.) M. Szatkowski, 141-64, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- (2016a). *Epistemic Angst. Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, (Online First, DOI: 10.1111/phpr.12280).
- (2016b). *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- (2017). 'Wittgenstein on Hinge Commitments and Radical Scepticism in *On Certainty*', *Blackwell Companion to Wittgenstein*, (eds.) H.-J. Glock & J. Hyman, 563-75, Oxford: Blackwell.
- (Forthcominga). 'Quasi-Fideism and Religious Conviction', *Epistemology of Religious Belief*, (ed.) M. Szatkowski, Berlin: DeGruyter.

- (*Forthcomingb*). ‘Faith and Reason’, *Philosophy*.
- Pritchard, D. H., Millar, A., & Haddock, A. (2010). *The Nature and Value of Knowledge: Three Investigations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roberts, R. C., & Wood, W. J. (2007). *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schonbaumsfeld, G. (2017). *The Illusion of Doubt*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stevenson, L. (2002). ‘Six Levels of Mentality’, *Philosophical Explorations* 5, 105-24.
- Tanesini, A. (2016). ‘Intellectual Humility as Attitude’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (Online First, DOI: 10.1111/phpr.12326).
- Taylor, J. E. (2017). ‘The New Atheists’, *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, (eds.) J. Fieser & B. Dowden, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/n-atheis/>.
- Williams, M. (2007). ‘Why (Wittgensteinian) Contextualism Is Not Relativism,’ *Episteme* 4, 93-114.
- (1991). *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1969). *On Certainty*, (eds.) G. E. M. Anscombe & G. H. von Wright, (tr.) D. Paul & G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell.
- van Fraassen, B. (1980). *The Scientific Image*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Whitcomb, D., Battaly, H., Baehr, J., & Howard-Synder, D. (*Forthcoming*). ‘Intellectual Humility: Owning our Limitations’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.
- Zimmerman, A. (*Forthcoming*). *Belief: A Pragmatic Picture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

NOTES

¹ Here, for example, is how the relevant *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* entry describes such disagreements:

“Suppose that two people form conflicting beliefs about a given question: one believes p while the other believes not- p .” (Goldman & Blanchard 2015, §3.4)

² I defend my view in Pritchard (2012), where I tackle one standard motivation for rejecting non-concessionary views, which is the ‘track-record’ argument. See also Kallestrup & Pritchard (*forthcoming*) where, following Roberts & Wood (2007), I defend an account of intellectual humility that consists in manifesting distinctive other-regarding attitudes, a view that is entirely compatible with maintaining one’s position in the light of peer disagreement (unlike other, more standard, accounts of intellectual humility in the contemporary literature). Similar views have been defended by Tanesini (2016), and by Priest (2016) in unpublished work that I have had the pleasure of reading (and seeing presented). For an influential, but very different, approach to intellectual humility, see Whitcomb *et al* (*forthcoming*).

³ And of course there are understandings of the term where it isn’t even a propositional attitude at all. See Stevenson (2002) for a helpful survey of a range of different ways in which the notion of belief is employed. Note that I follow Stevenson in thinking of ‘belief’ as being, following the mathematician and computer scientist Minsky’s (2007) memorable phrase (applied to ‘consciousness’ rather than ‘belief’), a ‘suitcase’ term. The idea is that there is not a single thing in play in peoples’ usage of this term (not just the folk, but also, for example, cognitive scientists and so forth), but rather a range of interconnected concepts. Inevitably, there will be those who will argue that there is a core notion of belief that trumps the others—an interesting recent account of belief, along pragmatist lines and which does allow beliefs to not be propositional attitudes (and also, e.g., to be the result of decision), of just this sort is offered in Zimmerman (*forthcoming*)—but I find this general approach both implausible and also liable to gloss over important distinctions. In any case, I won’t be arguing here for the suitcase view of belief, but taking it as a given.

⁴ I am here in particular thinking of the influential way that van Fraassen (1980) distinguishes between belief and acceptance, as part of a general motivation for scientific anti-realism.

⁵ See Frances (2014, ch. 1) for a useful discussion of such apparent disagreement cases and why they aren’t genuine.

⁶ Note that it is not being denied here that these mere apparent disagreements could develop into genuine ones, as when one disagrees with one’s devil’s advocate about whether such-and-such is a good objection to p (with you believing that it isn’t, and your opponent believing that it is, say). Now you *are* disagreeing, but just not about the truth of p itself. (Not yet anyway—but who knows where this exchange might go next?). Moreover, notice that in such a case your opponent is no longer playing devil’s advocate on this specific point anyway, as in this scenario she really does believe that such-and-such is a good objection to p .

⁷ There is an obvious exception to this, of course, which is a scientist who discovers something hitherto overlooked that calls the current climate data into question *en masse*. Such an agent could reject human-made climate change and yet not be committed to supposing that there is any conspiracy in play.

⁸ In terms of the UK media, for example, the journalist (for *The Telegraph*) Christopher Booker is one example of a prominent sceptic of human-made climate change who might fit this description. Note, by the way, that this point about sophisticated conspiracy theorists doesn’t mean that there aren’t dialectical poseurs as regards, say, the JFK conspiracy—clearly there are—but only that they will be harder to spot, as the threshold for being a sophisticated conspiracy theorist in this case will be lower.

⁹ Dialectical posturing is closely related to Frankfurt’s (2005) notion of *bullshit*, which is characterized by a lack of concern for the truth. The bullshitter likely isn’t presenting their beliefs either, and relatedly any dispute with them is not a genuine disagreement, nor does it impose any epistemic burden upon us to reflect on the truth of our beliefs. There might be some differences though, as Frankfurt’s view, as I understand it anyway, involves the bullshitter actively trying to persuade you of their position. In contrast, our dialectical poseur probably doesn’t care whether they convince you of anything; indeed, it will likely be important to their self-conception that they express views that most others do not share.

¹⁰ Note that I am not denying here that one might be (reasonably) intrigued by the counterargument and on that basis revise one’s conviction in the target proposition. But the point is that this epistemic import to your belief that p is not arising out of the disagreement *per se*, but out of your willingness to run with the counterargument (which you are in your epistemic rights to dismiss *tout court*). Some epistemologists have suggested that the mere raising of an error-possibility makes it relevant, in the sense that one needs to rationally discount it thereafter (this is a guiding thesis of attributer contextualism—see, e.g., Lewis (1996)). But I don’t think this kind of claim is at all plausible on closer inspection; we need a reason to take error-possibilities seriously (such as that so-and-so believes that it is so). (See Pritchard (2010b) for my take on some of these issues, in the specific context of perceptual knowledge).

¹¹ Note that the way that I describe the phenomenon is very superficial. In actuality, how best to describe the propositional attitude of those subjects who suffer from the Cotard delusion is very difficult, so this presentation is very much a caricatured one, simply for the purposes of this paper. For a useful overview of the literature on Cotard’s delusion from a psychological perspective, see Berrios & Luque (1995). (Note especially their use, in common with the literature on this topic, of the notion of belief to describe the deluded subject’s propositional attitude. They clearly do not have our more specific notion of belief in mind).

¹² See especially Pritchard (2016b).

¹³ Does that mean that one can't have rationally grounded knowledge that, say, one has hands? Although one might put the point that way, it would be a very misleading gloss, since on this view it is not as if one is *ignorant* of anything in failing to have rationally grounded knowledge of this proposition. The crux is rather that our hinge commitments are not in the market for rationally grounded knowledge in the first place.

¹⁴ See, especially, Pritchard (2016*b*). See also Pritchard (2012*b*; 2016*a*). For some key alternative readings of Wittgenstein in this regard, see Williams (1991), Moyal-Sharrock (2004), Coliva (2015), and Schonbaumsfeld (2017). For a recent survey of work on this topic, see Pritchard (2017).

¹⁵ See especially Moore (1925), but also Moore (1939). Arguably, some of the examples that Wittgenstein employs are from Newman (1970 [1870]). See Kienzler (2006) and Pritchard (2015) for some discussions of the (largely unacknowledged) influence that Newman's work had on the later Wittgenstein, particularly the notebooks that make up *On Certainty*. See also endnote 17.

¹⁶ This is also the reason why our hinge commitments are not *aliefs* either (Gendler 2008*a*; 2008*b*). In particular, aliefs can be in tension with what you believe, as when one believes that flying is safe but *alieves* that one is in danger in flying. This cannot be true of one's hinge commitments.

¹⁷ See, especially, Davidson (1983). For discussion of Davidson's view in this context, see Pritchard (2013). For more discussion of how Wittgenstein deals with epistemic relativism, see Pritchard (2010*a*).

¹⁸ Indeed, I think one of the chief concerns that Wittgenstein had in developing his hinge epistemology—and this relates to the influence of Newman (1970 [1870]) noted in endnote 14—is in applying it to religious conviction. For more on the application of hinge epistemology to the epistemology of religious belief—which I argue leads to a distinctive position that I call *quasi-fideism*—see Pritchard (2011; 2015; *forthcominga*; *forthcomingb*).

¹⁹ Why only *one* this side of the debate? The reason is that I don't want to take a stance here on whether atheism is a belief or a hinge commitment (it doesn't matter anyway, since as we saw earlier, there are cases of non-genuine disagreement where only one side lacks belief in the target proposition, such as our dialectical poseur).

²⁰ Construed more charitably, it was rather aimed at those undecided about the matter. For a philosophical survey of the New Atheism movement, see Taylor (2017).

²¹ For further discussion of the relationship between hinge epistemology and epistemic incommensurability/epistemic relativism, see Williams (2007), Pritchard (2009; 2010*a*), and Kusch (2016).

²² Thanks to Sven Bernecker and Aaron Zimmerman for useful discussions on topics related to the paper. Special thanks to Casey Johnson for detailed comments on an earlier version of this paper. This paper has benefitted from three grants awarded by the Templeton Foundation, all of them for projects hosted at the University of Edinburgh's *Eidyn* research centre. These are: (i) the 'Virtue Epistemology, Epistemic Dependence and Intellectual Humility' project, which was itself part of the wider 'Philosophy and Theology of Intellectual Humility Project' hosted by Saint Louis University; (ii) the 'Intellectual Humility MOOC' project; and (iii) the 'Philosophy, Science and Religion Online' project. In addition, thanks also to the University of Connecticut's Humanities Institute, where I was a visiting professorial fellow while working on this paper, and where I also participated in the 'Humility and Conviction in Public Life' project, which is also funded by the John Templeton Foundation.